

Understanding Thatcher:

A Discourse Analysis of Her Speeches Regarding the Northern Irish Troubles

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Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was known for her tough policies, wit, and being in power during the Troubles.¹ Thatcher served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland (UK) from 1979 to 1990.² The Troubles lasted for 30 years, 11 of which Thatcher was Prime Minister. They were a period in Northern Ireland of sectarian violence between Unionists and Republicans.³ Unionists were a group that wanted to remain part of the UK while Republicans wanted to leave the UK and unify the Island of Ireland.⁴ Unionists comprised 50% of the population of Northern Ireland, while Republicans consisted of about 40%.⁵ This paper will examine three speeches on The Troubles that Thatcher gave during her term as Prime Minister. In each, the language used demonstrated her worldview and political opinions. This paper will argue that the language used in her speeches minimized the conflict, villainized the militant Republican community, and served her political motivations, but this developed into a more nuanced understanding of the conflict over time.

Methodology

This paper examines three speeches made by Margaret Thatcher during her tenure as Prime Minister. The first is a fragment from a radio interview, and the second and third are transcripts of British House of Commons Proceedings. These speeches were chosen from the Margaret Thatcher Foundation online archives. The search method included looking at speeches and interviews Thatcher gave as Prime Minister which included the words, “Northern Ireland”

¹ Chris Ogden, *Maggie: An Intimate Portrait of a Woman in Power*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 14.

² Keith Laybourn, *Fifty Key Figures in Twentieth-Century British Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 214.

³ Adrian Guelke, “The Northern Ireland Peace Process and the War Against Terrorism: Conflicting Conceptions?,” *Government and Opposition* (London) 42, no. 3 (2007): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2007.00224.x>.

⁴ Hewstone, et. al. “Intergroup Contact, Forgiveness, and Experience of ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Social Issues* 62, no. 1 (2006): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2006.00441.x>.

⁵ Hewstone, et. al. “Intergroup Contact, Forgiveness, and Experience of ‘The Troubles’ in Northern Ireland,” 101.

with regard to the Union of UK nations. This search yielded 31 results.⁶ Results were then narrowed to documents where the phrase “Northern Ireland” was mentioned more than 10 times. This occurred in three speeches. The first speech mentions “Northern Ireland” 12 times, the second 37 times, and the third 124 times. Speeches were then examined for language and repeated phrases used by Thatcher in order to understand her political worldview, and determine possible motivations.

Document One

The first document to be examined is a fragment of a transcript of a radio interview with Margaret Thatcher. This interview was done by Peter Allen for the Independent Radio Network on May 22nd, 1983, as part of Sunday morning programming.⁷ The structure of the interview involved several individuals calling in, asking Thatcher questions, while Allen moderated the discussion. The fragment examined involves a question from “Elizabeth from Belfast”. This document uses semi-formal language as Thatcher uses uncomplicated words and refrains from using slang or political jargon.

Firstly, Thatcher contrasted the British to Republicans. She called the UK a democratic society, with the assembly and elections being the legitimate place to express opinions⁸. This language of rationalism and fairness paints Britain as a civilized country where everyone has an equal say in governance. In comparison, she speaks of Republicans as terrorists and intimidators,

⁶ Margaret Thatcher Foundation. “Search Results” Archive.

https://www.margaretthatcher.org/search?w=%22Northern+Ireland%22&startDate=1979-05-04&endDate=1990-11-28&theme%5B%5D=8&doctype%5B%5D=speeches&sort_by=field_date&sort_order=ASC&items_per_page=100.

⁷ IRN Radio. “Home” <https://irnhamradio.weebly.com/>

⁸ Margaret Thatcher, “Radio Interview for IRN (phone-in),” 1983 May 22 Sunday, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105326>.

using bullets because they are unable to win elections.⁹ The language used with reference to Republicans paints them as non-civilized, trying to seize power unfairly.

Secondly, Thatcher tried to raise sympathy for the people living in Northern Ireland and rally the population behind the British cause. She appealed to mothers, asking them to stand up against the “intimidators” as they should not want their children raised in a violent environment.¹⁰ This language may have been an attempt to raise sympathy across the UK for the mothers and children subjected to these conditions. Finally, she painted the citizens of Northern Ireland as “just British” where their identities may be complex.¹¹ This would contribute to raising sympathy, as the mainland British population would feel more affinity towards other British citizens.

The main message that this speech portrays is the friend-enemy binary. Thatcher portrayed mothers and the British in Northern Ireland who are suffering from this violence, as friends, and the violent Republicans who are trying to unjustly seize power, as enemies. Thatcher’s language simplified the conflict to this binary to give the British people a group to support and a clear enemy.

Document Two

The second document to be examined is a transcript of a session in the UK House of Commons from November 8th, 1983. This transcript contains a short statement by Thatcher, questions from various Members of Parliament (MPs) and her responses. The topic discussed is

⁹ Thatcher, “Radio Interview for IRN (phone-in).”

¹⁰ Thatcher, “Radio Interview for IRN (phone-in).”

¹¹ Thatcher, “Radio Interview for IRN (phone-in).”

the Anglo-Irish summit meeting held with the Irish Taoiseach on November 7th, 1983.¹² The language in this document is formal, with the use of political, legal and technical words.

Firstly, Thatcher denied the severity of the situation. Thatcher is questioned several times on the “alienation” Republicans are experiencing, and using to justify the conflict.¹³ She states she is “not aware” of the “increasing alienation” within the “minority community” and refuses to concede that some feel alienated.¹⁴ By not conceding, she is not recognizing or giving legitimacy to the justification Republicans are offering as the reason for the conflict. Avoiding using language of alienation allowed her to paint the Republicans as irrational and gave cause for British military intervention.

Secondly, Thatcher emphasized national self-determination, the idea that citizens of a nation should be able to collectively decide their system of government. Thatcher argued that since the majority of Northern Irish people are Unionists, it should remain in the UK.¹⁵ She said “Northern Ireland's constitutional position remains fully safeguarded by the statutory provisions that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and will continue to be so unless her people wish her otherwise.”¹⁶ This language of self determination allowed her to justify ignoring the complaints of the minority Republican Community.

Thirdly, Thatcher discussed Sinn Féin. She questioned why support had gone from the “constitutional republican parties” to the “other parties”.¹⁷ This likely referred to Sinn Féin; a more radical Republican party¹⁸. She said she was concerned about the increase in support for

¹² Margaret Thatcher, “HC Stmnt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting],” 1983 Nov 8 Tuesday.
<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105466>.

¹³ Thatcher, “HC Stmnt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting].”

¹⁴ Thatcher, “HC Stmnt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting].”

¹⁵ Thatcher, “HC Stmnt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting].”

¹⁶ Thatcher, “HC Stmnt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting].”

¹⁷ Thatcher, “HC Stmnt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting].”

¹⁸ Stephen Hopkins, “Sinn Féin, the Past and Political Strategy: The Provisional Irish Republican Movement and the Politics of ‘Reconciliation,’” *Irish Political Studies* 30, no. 1 (2015): 80,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2014.942293>.

Sinn Fein and, likely because increasing support for them would likely lead to decreasing support for remaining in the Union.¹⁹ Utilizing language portraying fear of Sinn Fein connects them to other more radical Republican paramilitary groups and delegitimizes them as a political party.

In this speech, Thatcher downplayed the conflict; firstly, by not recognizing or legitimating the motivations for the violence; secondly, by not recognizing the goal that the perpetrators of violence would like to achieve; and thirdly, by connecting the legitimate political party to violence, to delegitimize them. These tactics allowed Thatcher to ignore the conflict's political connotations and maintain the position that Northern Ireland should remain in the UK.

Document Three

The third document to be examined is a transcript of a session in the UK House of Commons from November 18th, 1985.²⁰ It contains a short statement made by Margaret Thatcher, then moves to various questions from MPs and her answers. This session regards an agreement between the British and Irish government to promote peace and stability within Northern Ireland. The language used in this document is formal, uses complicated words, and expects a significant degree of knowledge of the political and legal situation to comprehend its subject matter.

Firstly, Thatcher used language that indicated a shifting relationship with the prominent political figures in the conflict. She continued to refer to Republicans negatively, as “men of violence”.²¹ However, her language towards Unionists also became negative. The agreement that

¹⁹ Thatcher, “HC Stmt: [Anglo-Irish Summit Meeting].”

²⁰ Margaret Thatcher, “HC Stmt: [Anglo-Irish Agreement],” 1985 Nov 18 Monday, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106176>.

²¹ Thatcher, “HC Stmt: [Anglo-Irish Agreement]. ”

she negotiated has the Republic of Ireland recognize Northern Ireland as belonging to the UK, something that should make Unionists pleased.²² However, many Unionist MP's expressed dissatisfaction and fear regarding this agreement. Thatcher accused them of "needlessly arousing fears".²³ Language like this demonstrated her frustration with Unionists, and the Northern Irish conflict overall.

Secondly, Thatcher insisted on increased cooperation between all conflict actors. This emphasis on communication demonstrated that Thatcher had an urge to resolve this conflict. Language of cooperation indicated that she recognized that there was a conflict occurring, and that all parties had a role to play in it, and in resolving it. She said that "both communities" want the defeat of "men of violence".²⁴ This is a recognition of the legitimacy of a Republican Community outside of the "men of violence". This language indicated a recognition of the issues occurring, and of the actors participating in these conflicts.

In this speech, Thatcher demonstrated an understanding that there is a conflict occurring and that all communities have a role in resolving it. By utilizing negative language toward Unionists she demonstrated a recognition of the culpability of both sides and by using the language of cooperation she demonstrated a belief that the conflict must be solved by working together and promoting communal efforts for peace.

Connections Between Documents

Finally, the connections and similarities between these three documents will be examined. While all documents were created by the same person with regard to the same issue, they were created at different times and in different political contexts. Document one was created

²² Thatcher, "HC Stmt: [Anglo-Irish Agreement]. "

²³ Thatcher, "HC Stmt: [Anglo-Irish Agreement]. "

²⁴ Thatcher, "HC Stmt: [Anglo-Irish Agreement]. "

in May 1983, document two in November 1983, and document three in November 1985. Each of these documents used similar language. Thatcher used formal and professional English, though alternates from semi-formal to technical depending on the audience for her speech.

Two themes ran throughout the documents. In the first two documents she portrayed a negative view towards Republicans, particularly to those in Sinn Fein or paramilitary groups. She referred to them as terrorists, men of violence, and the minority group. She failed to recognize their motivations, alienation, speak to their concerns or demands for representation. In the third document, a distinction is asserted between the “men of violence” and the general Republican Community. This demonstrates an increased awareness, and recognition of the intricacies of the conflict. The second theme is democracy and national self-determination. She insisted the majority group, Unionists, should determine what happens in Northern Ireland, and that the only appropriate form of politics is voting and formal government. In the first two documents, she did not suggest a need to negotiate with Republicans as they were not in power, but in the third, this is conceded as she emphasized cooperation between both communities.

Next, possible political motivations for the language used will be proposed. Firstly, the British government was essentially at war with Republican groups. By dehumanizing them, and calling them terrorists, it permitted the violence that the state perpetrated against them. If their cause was not recognized as legitimate or political it allowed the British government to punish the terrorists on criminal terms, and exclude them from political discussions. Secondly, the language of national self-determination allowed for legitimation of British rule over Northern Ireland. Thatcher argued that because the majority accepted British rule, it should be permitted, and she did not have to make political or governance concessions to other groups within society. Thirdly, this language created a friend-enemy distinction between Republicans and British,

meaning Thatcher did not have to recognize the violence the British troops were committing, because these acts of violence were against a collective enemy. It also allowed her to mobilize society against Republicans. Overall, the language she used throughout all documents aided in perpetuating the political worldview she held, and legitimized her political action or inaction.

Conclusion

Margaret Thatcher's political speeches, and language used within, were telling of her political position. The Northern Irish conflict was complicated, with many victims. In speeches, Thatcher simplified this conflict by not recognizing parts of it and labeling certain groups as the enemy. In the first document, she created a friend-enemy distinction where the mothers and the British in Northern Ireland were put against the violent Republicans, whose political motivations were not given legitimacy. In the second document, Thatcher minimized the conflict by not recognizing motivations for violence, goals for violence, and by connecting Sinn Fein to violence, delegitimizing them. In the third document, Thatcher recognized the conflict, that cooperation was needed, as well as recognized the capability of Unionists. In the first two documents, the conflict and those who commit violence were delegitimized, but by the third document, the nuance of the conflict was discussed. In each, the language she used demonstrated her political worldview and motivation, and thus careful study of her speeches can be used to understand Thatcher's approach to this conflict.

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